



NEWSLETTER

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF THE MILITARY



SD ARMY NATIONAL GUARD COMMISSIONS SIX NEW OFFICERS

The South Dakota Army National Guard welcomed six new officers to its ranks during a commissioning ceremony at Camp Rapid Aug. 22.

The ceremony commemorated their completion of Officer Candidate School Class 64, which consisted of a year and a half of training to become future leaders in the SDARNG.

OCS is taught in a high-stress environment, where candidates are tested academically and physically, both in the classroom and in field environments. Training consists of 16-18 months of drill weekends and two, two-week training periods.

The ceremony included several traditions: the pinning of rank on the officers' uniform, their first salute to an enlisted soldier, and reciting the oath of office.

The new second lieutenants will join their assigned units and begin the next phase of their officer development by attending a Basic Officer Leader course, which focuses on their assigned branch of service, such as engineering and field artillery or transportation, to name a few.

The second lieutenants of OCS Class 64 are:

Soldier:

2nd Lt. Bryce Nussbaum, Rapid City—Forward Support Company, 109th Engineer Batt.

2nd Lt. Brandon Roth, Garretson—740th Transportation Company

2nd Lt. Hillary Smith, Miller—235th Military Police Company

2nd Lt. Tayler Thomsen, Hot Springs—Forward Support Company, 109th Engineer Batt.

2nd Lt. Luke Whalen, Clark—1742nd Transportation Company

2nd Lt. Derek Nehring, Parker—Transfer to Nebraska Army National Guard.



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MESSAGE FROM SECRETARY WHITLOCK

Home ownership is a big step, both emotionally and financially. Owning your home can be a rewarding experience.

A home is a place to call your own, raise a family, build memories, and become part of a neighborhood and community. It also means meeting personal and financial goals and investing in your future.

A great benefit for veterans is the VA home loan. Backed by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, VA loans are designed to help active-duty military personnel and veterans. VA loans are advantageous because they have a government guarantee, they come in many varieties, and loan closing costs are lower. VA loans are also assumable, meaning they can be transferred to a future buyer.

Veterans, if you are not using your VA home loan benefit, we encourage you to reach out to your lender and inquire about your options. Mortgage rates are at a record low.

If you qualify, veterans can also use a VA Home Loan to buy a Governor's House from the South Dakota Housing Development Authority. To see if you qualify visit:



<https://www.sdhda.org/homeownership/governors-house-program>. To take a virtual tour or view floor plans visit: <https://www.sdhda.org/homeownership/governors-house-program/floor-plans> or <https://www.sdhda.org/homeownership/governors-house-program/virtual-tour>.

SDHDA has made considerable changes to these homes to give them a more modern appeal, including such things as the interior and exterior of the house, energy efficient heating/cooling systems, energy efficient appliances, modern shaker style cabinets, new countertop patterns, new lighting options, and bay windows.

Four walls and a roof over your head isn't the only way we define the word 'home.' Home is more than just a shelter, it's where we love, it's where we feel, it's where we can be ourselves and it's where life happens.

As always, if you want to learn more about veteran's benefits, please call our team at 605.333.6869.

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

SDDVA HOSTS ANNUAL CTVSO BENEFIT SCHOOL

County and tribal veterans' service officers (CTVSO) and staff from the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs (SDDVA) were recognized for their dedication to serving veterans and veterans' families at an awards program Monday, Aug. 24, in Pierre. Details of the awards can be found on pages 4-6.

The annual event, organized by the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, was held in conjunction with the veterans' benefits training conference for CTVSOs.

"Our County and Tribal Veterans Services officers serve as counselors, ministers, lawyers, fellow veterans and much more," said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. "Veterans' needs vary from mental to physical health needs. These award winners are the best of the best. They care for each and every person that walks through their doors."

As John Quincy Adams said, "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader."

"It was truly an honor to recognize these great leaders," said Whitlock. "Our trailblazers know how to use whatever's at hand and make the best of any situation."

County veterans service officers were also recognized for their years of service: Harvey Schaible (McPherson County) 20 years; Darrel Pfeifle (McPherson County) 22 years; Al Janzen (Codington County) 22 years; Bob Sheffield (Hyde County) 15 years; Terry Cousins (Tripp County) 12 years, and Terry Lee (Miner County) 20 years.

Service officers were offered numerous options to participate in the training due to COVID.

Senator Rounds joined the group Monday evening outside and updated SDDVA staff and CTVSOs on what is happening in Washington, DC. He also asked the group to share issues they are facing and encouraged them to work with him and his team to find solutions for these issues.



MULDER NAMED 2020 SDDVA EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Hannah Mulder of Sioux Falls has been named the 2020 South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs Employee of the Year. Mulder was recognized by her peers at SDDVA's annual benefit conference Monday, Aug. 24, in Pierre.

Hannah joined the SDDVA team in 2019 and serves as a state claims examiner.

Key achievements of the Employee of the Year include: exceeding expectations regarding veteran's issues, commitment to, and enthusiasm for the Department's mission statement, job knowledge, outstanding outreach efforts, involvement and active participation with service organizations, and growing relationships with CTVSOs.

"Hannah is very dedicated and has an outstanding work ethic," said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. "Hannah's talents ensure that the claims we are submitting are error free and timely. She never turns down the opportunity to learn new things. Her curious mind and her love for learning are an asset to the Department."



RICHARDSON NAMED CTVSO OF THE YEAR

Kathy Richardson of Sioux Falls has been named the 2020 South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs “County/Tribal Veterans Service Officer of the Year.” Richardson was recognized by her peers at SDDVA’s annual benefit conference Monday, Aug. 24, in Pierre.

Richardson, veterans service officer for Minnehaha County, was awarded the 2020 County and Tribal Veterans Service Officer of the Year award for her knowledge of federal and state regulations governing veteran’s benefits, as well as quality of the claims she files.

Key achievements of the CTVSO of the Year include: customer service, submission of complete and accurate claims, outstanding office management, and utilizing new and innovative procedures and technologies.

“Kathy excels in her attention to detail and knowledge of claims,” said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. “Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, she was on the

lookout for new opportunities to meet and assist veterans in filing their claims. As a great leader, she knows the importance of connectedness and works hard on creating and maintaining great relationships with her veterans and their families.”

Richardson’s office serves over 12,000 veterans in Minnehaha County, as well as numerous veterans from counties bordering Minnehaha County.



SCHLECHT NAMED 2020 SDDVA PARTNER OF THE YEAR

Kathy Schlecht, of Aberdeen has been named the 2020 South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs Partner of the Year. Schlecht was recognized by her peers at SDDVA's annual benefit conference Monday, Aug. 24, in Pierre.

Schlecht, assistant veterans service officer for Brown County, was awarded the 2020 Partner of the Year award for her compassion, commitment, knowledge and professionalism when assisting South Dakota's veterans.

Key achievements of the Partner of the Year include: best overall service provided by support staff of a County or Tribal Veteran Service Officer, outstanding customer service in assisting veterans and their families, great office management, and utilizing new technologies that benefit our network.

"Kathy Schlecht is excellent in her role as assistant veterans service officer," said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. "She accomplishes her immediate tasks but is always thinking three steps ahead."

Schlecht's office serves over 2,400 veterans in Brown and neighboring counties.

Schlecht operated the Brown County VSO office while CVSO Aaron Walberg was deployed.

OPSAL RECEIVES 2020 SDDVA OUTREACH AWARD

Geri Opsal of Agency Village has been named the 2020 South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs Outreach Partner of the Year. Opsal was recognized by her peers at SDDVA's annual benefit conference Monday, Aug. 24, in Pierre.

Opsal, tribal veterans service officer for Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, was awarded the 2020 Outreach Partner of the Year award for going above and beyond in her efforts to reach out to South Dakota's Veterans.

Key achievements for outreach include: ensuring that veterans are aware of their benefits, conducting informational meetings, involvement in community activities and events, maintaining good media relations, and excelling in obtaining medals for veterans.

"Geri is an extremely active and visible VSO in her community," said Greg Whitlock, Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. "She is very connected and works with community leaders to enhance the lives of veterans."

Great leaders know the importance of connectedness. She makes it a priority to inspire, teach, support and encourage others."

VETERANS DAY AT THE FAIR

At the request of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs, Gov. Kristi Noem has proclaimed Thursday, Sept. 3, 2020, as Veterans Day at the South Dakota State Fair, calling on all South Dakotans to honor those men and women who fought bravely for our freedoms.

At 10:30 a.m. on September 3, the South Dakota State Fair will host a “Salute to Veterans” program in the Grandstand. South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg will serve as the keynote speaker.

A combat veteran, Ravnsborg deployed in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom to Germany, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He currently serves as a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army Reserves with nearly 24 years of service. He has had four company commands and

also served as a battalion commander overseeing over 600 soldiers in South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska and Missouri. He is currently assigned to Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

“Whether in peace or at war, the important role of our veterans cannot be denied. They are men and women from all walks of life that have one thing in common – a love for this great country,” said Secretary Greg Whitlock. “No matter where or when veterans have served, they’ve always served with distinction and their service to this country is a bridge that was built on courage, dedication and patriotism.”

Representatives from the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs will have an informational booth (Booth #50) in the Expo Building throughout the week. Veterans are encouraged to stop by the booth and learn more about benefits and programs available to them as well.

Whitlock especially encourages Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans to stop by and visit with SDDVA staff about disability benefits.

To show appreciation for their service, the Fair will give all veterans and active military personnel free gate admission on Sept 3.



VA'S BOARD OF VETERANS' APPEALS REACHES APPEAL DECISIONS GOAL EARLY

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board) has exceeded its annual goal of issuing 91,500 appeals decisions in fiscal year 2020.

The Board reached this goal weeks ahead of schedule and is on track to issue more decisions.

"This goal was reached ahead of schedule despite the challenges and difficulties of operating during the COVID-19 pandemic," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. This shows the Board's agility, flexibility, and most importantly its unwavering commitment to veterans."

The Board was able to quickly pivot to a 99% telework environment at the onset of COVID-19, to ensure that appeals decisions on the VA benefits and services to veterans were not delayed.

It has also provided veterans the option to choose virtual tele-hearings, allowing them to continue to hold hearings before the Board in a safe, no-contact environment. Since March 23, the Board has held more than 3,000 virtual tele-hearings and continues to increase capacity for more veterans to transition to a virtual hearing environment.

BIG SHOUT OUT TO THE BARREL HOUSE TEAM



A Big SHOUT OUT and thanks to the team at the Sioux Falls Barrel House.

A percentage of sales this past Monday raised \$2,227 for Mid-west Honor Flight!

VA'S DIGITAL COVID-19 SCREENING FOR VETERANS, EMPLOYEES, AIDS IN LOW INFECTION RATE

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the use of [digital screening at VA health care facilities](#) and [increased telehealth](#) has enabled the department to dramatically increase the rate of COVID-19 testing for veterans and employees.

To date, VA has tested more than 576,000 veterans and employees for COVID-19, one of many aggressive steps used to prevent transmission of the virus.

The Veterans Health Administration's COVID-19 employee infection rate is less than 1% of its workforce – much lower than other health care systems. Employees testing positive for coronavirus could be due to exposure in the community and not related to any potential workplace exposure.

“Testing is a critical piece of the VA's public health response to protect and care for veterans, their families, health care providers and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Our testing policies and procedures have helped to significantly limit the spread of the virus within our medical facilities, while universal COVID-19 testing for patients and staff as well as other safeguards at VA's community living centers and spinal cord injury units has minimized the COVID-19 exposure risk for some of our most vulnerable patient populations.”

In March, VA tested an average of 631 people a day for COVID-19. As of Aug. 24, the VA is currently testing an average of 6,300 people daily, approximately a 900% increase, and has diagnosed 43,276 veterans with COVID-19. Among its 9.2 million patients enrolled in VA health care, 3,195 are active COVID-19 cases, 413 of which are inpatient. A total of 37,293 VA COVID-19 patients have reached convalescence, meaning they have been discharged from care or are 14 days past their last positive test, whichever comes later.

Veterans can request a COVID-19 test by sending a secure message to their provider via My HealtheVet, scheduling an appointment online or calling their provider by phone.

Veterans must be enrolled in VA health care to receive a COVID-19 test through the VA. There is no co-pay. Results typically take two to four days and the medical provider will contact the veteran with results. Veterans who test positive should monitor their symptoms, stay in touch with their medical provider, and avoid contact with anyone else.

Visit [VA's public health response webpage](#) for more information on ways to protect against COVID-19. For a real-time look at the status of COVID-19 patients who have been tested or treated at VA facilities visit [VA's COVID-19 National Summary webpage](#).



Whole Health Bingo

<p>"Chalk-the-Walk" Put a positive message in chalk out on the sidewalk. At business or home.</p>	<p>Take a walk with your family. After work or on the weekend, make space for a family walk.</p>	<p>Make some body laugh. Go out of your way to tell a joke or to make somebody's day through laughter.</p>	<p>Don't drink alcohol or soda for a week.</p> 	<p>Turn off the electronics for a night. Spend time with friends and family instead of a screen.</p>
<p>Get at least 8 hours of sleep for 3 nights.</p> 	<p>Play Together Strong simulation. Jointogether-strong.com</p>	<p>Thank a Veteran for their service by buying them a coffee or a meal.</p>	<p>Practice Mindfulness. Do a ten minute meditation that you found off the internet.</p>	<p>Eat at home! Don't eat out for a period of five days.</p>
<p>Home game night. Spend time playing a board game or outdoor game with friends/family.</p>	<p>Eliminate sweets for a day! If you're really cool, then you'll try to do it for two days!</p> 	<p>(FREE) You get a free spot here, but you could give yourself points for doing something Awesome!</p>	<p>Have a coffee date with a friend. (while keeping social distance).</p>	<p>Make a gratitude list. List three things that you are thankful for in your life.</p>
<p>Listen to a TED talk and recommend a TED talk to someone else. TED.com</p>	<p>Send a card or letter to a friend or relative (in the mail).</p>	<p>Read a book or listen to a long form interview on a subject that is inspiring.</p>	<p>Drink at least 64oz of water a day for three days.</p> 	<p>Text five friends you have not texted in the last 2 weeks.</p>
<p>Check in on a friend or family member. Ask them how they are doing?</p>	<p>Facetime/Skype/Zoom with a friend you have not been able to see.</p>	<p>Give up social media for a day or LONGER.</p>	<p>Paint a rock with the Suicide Prevention Hotline Number 1-800-273-8255.</p>	<p>Do something thoughtful for a friend, team, or colleague.</p>

#BeThere

September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month.

Remember to #BeThere for others and for yourself.

VA ROLLS OUT NEW PATIENT APPOINTMENT TOOL

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) launched a new appointment scheduling tool Aug. 21 at the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System to make medical visits more efficient for care providers and Veterans.

A critical component of VA's [Electronic Health Record Modernization \(EHRM\)](#) effort, the [Centralized Scheduling Solution](#) (CSS) will be implemented at all VA health facilities to expedite patient-care coordination throughout the department.

"VA has delivered an enhanced scheduling system that will benefit Veterans and health care providers," said Acting VA Deputy Secretary Pamela Powers, who has oversight of VA's EHRM program. "This is another successful launch of a major milestone in the EHRM effort and will optimize Veterans' access to health care by improving appointment scheduling. CSS also provides an efficient and transparent method of identifying and eliminating double bookings, flagging canceled appointments and maximizing provider time spent with patients."

VA's current scheduling solutions require VA staff to log in to multiple software applications to coordinate calendars, clinicians, rooms and equipment. This process requires time-intensive manual data entry and workarounds to finalize appointments. CSS will address these challenges by providing an "all-in-one" appointment management solu-

tion that offers scheduling by resource (e.g., clinician, room, equipment), simple color-coded time slots and a single view for coordinating schedules across multiple locations.

Through EHRM, VA will move from using its existing electronic health record (EHR) system, the software that stores patient information and tracks all aspects of Veteran care, to a new EHR solution that is interoperable with the Department of Defense (DOD) system. Initial [EHR rollout](#) at VA sites will start in fall 2020.

Upon full implementation at all sites, the new EHR will unify all VA health care facilities into one system linked with DOD. This modernization effort will create a comprehensive health record to provide seamless care for service members and Veterans. Visit VA's [EHRM program and CSS](#) for more information.





My Life My Story-Writing Classes with Travis Jacobs (Virtual Group)

Travis Jacobs, Sioux Falls writer and author will be providing classes virtually through VA Video Connect. Active email is required for VVC. Limit of five veterans per class.

These classes are designed to help facilitate the writing process. Veterans learn prompts that may be useful to develop their written story for the *My Life, My Story* to be entered into their medical record or just for fun! This is a good way to learn writing tips and be able to connect with others in a safe manner.

Please contact the Sioux Falls Vet Center to sign up for a Virtual class! 605-330-4552

- ***Friday, August 28th 6:30-7:30pm***
- ***Sunday, September 13th 2:30-3:30pm***



UPCOMING EVENTS

Sep 3—Veterans Day at the SD State Fair

Sep 3-7—SD State Fair

Sep 5—DAV/727 Poker Run—Swiftel Center—Brookings

Sep 7—State Offices Closed

Sep 11—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—VFW Post 1273—Rapid City—10:00 am (MT)

Sep 18—POW/MIA Day Ceremony—Veterans Memorial Park—Sioux Falls—6:30 pm (CT)

Oct 21—SD Veterans Council Meeting—Sioux Falls

Nov 13—VABHHCS VSO Congressional Forum—Domiciliary Auditorium—Hot Springs VAMC—10:00 am (MT)

Dec 1—Governor's State of the Budget Address—1:00 pm (CT)

Jan 12—Governor's State of the State Address—1:00 pm (CT)

Jan 13—SDDVA/SD Veterans Council Legislative Reception



The South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs will have a booth at the State Fair.

On Thursday, September 3, the Department will be located in front of the Grand Stands where the "Veterans Day at the Fair" program will be held.

On Friday-Monday, September 4-7, the Department will have a booth in the Expo Building.

Audry Ricketts, Public Information Officer

South Dakota Department of the Military <https://military.sd.gov/default.html>

South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs <https://vetaffairs.sd.gov>

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